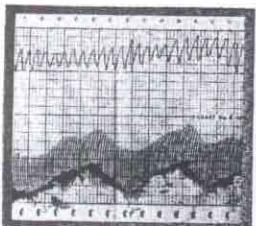


"It's none of your lousy business"



A polygraph chart; the peaks indicate lies.

WASHINGTON: "When I went to West Point I took all that about 'Duty, Honor, Country' seriously—I thought an officer of the United States Army was a man whose word was to be trusted. Now it turns out if I'm assigned to some staff school or something I have to be strapped in a chair and have some damn GS-9 in a white coat take my blood pressure and so on to see if I'm lying."

George Orwell's famous book, 1984, which described a future world in which all right of privacy had been surrendered to an omnipotent "Big Brother," was written in 1948. The words quoted above, which were spoken recently by a high-ranking Army officer, serve as a bleak reminder that 1984 is now only twenty years in the future. Since Orwell wrote his book, we have made considerable progress toward that kind of world.

The Army officer was talking about the Pentagon's habit of subjecting its denizens, up to and including general officers and the highest-ranking civilians, to the attentions of the polygraph, or lie detector. The purpose of the polygraph is, of course, to detect the hidden emotions of the subject, by measuring such involuntary symptoms of emotion as pulse, blood pressure, rate of breathing and perspiration.

The whole American Government is now in the emotion-measuring business in a big way. Last year 58 government agencies conducted more than 23,000 polygraph tests at a cost of five million dollars. Actually, there were probably upward of 40,000 tests, since the so-called "sneaky agencies," the CIA and the Pentagon intelligence outfits, refused on grounds of security to supply information to Congress on polygraph tests.

The chief justification for this massive exercise in emotion measuring is that the polygraph catches spies. In fact, the polygraph provides no assurance of detecting trained Communist agents. Not long ago, to cite one example, an agent in the employment of the Defense Department (not an American) was discovered to be a Moscow-trained double agent. The proof was positive. But to obtain a confession, the man was given a polygraph test, which can be used as an instrument of intimidation to "break" a suspect.

One of the most experienced of the Pentagon's several hundred polygraph operators was assigned to the task. The operator approached his assignment circumspectly, skillfully building a sense of confidence in the agent. Then he fired the question: "Are you a Soviet agent?"

The answer came quietly: "No." Instead of the expected jagged lines on the indicators, there was not a flicker—pulse, breathing rate, blood pressure were absolutely steady. The polygraph operator tried again, and again, with the same result. "This man," the operator concluded, "is innocent."

He was not innocent at all. He was later broken by other means, and it turned out that he had been through a special course thoughtfully provided in the espionage school of the KGB, the Soviet equivalent of the CIA plus the FBI. The KGB course, which is given to all Soviet spies, is designed to precondition them psychologically to resist the polygraph, by a process known as "rationalization." The process is so successful that the KGB very rarely uses the polygraph in counter-espionage work, on the assumption that no trained agent can be caught by it.

Experiments in similar psychological preconditioning in this country have confirmed its effectiveness. Experimenters play "the card game." In the card game, three or more cards are placed face down on a table. The subject chooses one card, looks at it, puts it in his pocket. The operator asks him questions about the card and tries, by catching his lies, to identify it. A well-trained subject can fool the operator again and again. So can a psychotic or neurotic type, who believes his own lies. There is the doubtlessly apocryphal story of the lunatic who was subjected to a polygraph test. "Are you Napoleon?" he was asked. He hotly denied it, but the polygraph showed that he was lying.

A recent expert study concluded, according to Vance Packard, author of *The Naked Society*, "that the lie detector might at best be 70 percent accurate in drawing out the truth."

Seventy percent accuracy hardly seems to justify the American Government's vast exercise in emotion testing. And the 40,000 or so American citizens lie-tested by the Federal Government are only a fraction of those tested by private industry and by state and municipal authorities.

The polygraph first came into general use in the CIA about 15 years ago. The use of the device in the sneaky agencies no doubt makes a certain sense—the machine does usefully point the finger at amateur traitors, and people who go to work for sneaky agencies must be expected to be treated sneakily. But the use of the polygraph has now spread, like some horrid fungus, from the CIA throughout the Government; and thence into large sectors of the private economy.

The next technological "advance" may bring us closer to 1984, by a giant leap. Experimental work has been going forward on a new kind of polygraph—an especially designed but ordinary-seeming chair, which would measure its occupant's breathing, pulse rate, etc., without his knowing it. Thus the victim's hidden emotional reactions to a seemingly routine interview could be recorded.

The polygraph is only one of the weapons of the growing army of professional snoops. In last week's *Post*, Ben H. Bagdikian described the bugs, taps and other devices which the American Government uses to spy on itself. Governments also use the same devices to spy on other governments, of course, and it came as no great surprise that the Soviets had concealed no less than 40 bugs in the walls of the American Embassy in Moscow.

What is surprising is that so many ordinary American citizens tolerate without protest the most shameless invasion of their privacy. Many people are almost as accustomed to having their emotions, private attitudes and personal histories explored by psychologists and amateur snoops as they are to having their teeth examined by the dentist.

The invasion of privacy will only be halted when a lot of people get angry about it. A man's sex life, political views and childhood relationship with his mother are his own business, and nobody else's. The proper response to questions about such matters is a loud, positive: "IT'S NONE OF YOUR LOUSY BUSINESS." Unless a lot of people get angry enough to use that phrase, or something like it, the day is surely coming when not even Walter Mitty can have a secret life, and Big Brother will rule supreme.

Stewart Alsop